

The University of Chicago

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IN INDIANA TO 1858

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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A Sketch of Congregationalism in Indiana to 1858

FREDERICK KUHNS¹

The story of early Congregationalism in Indiana has never been fully told. Brief accounts of a general nature, and anniversary sketches of individual churches have, of course, been written, but no adequate treatment of the subject, based on the available manuscript material, has ever appeared. In part this is because Congregationalists were not writing the history of their denomination as leaders of other denominations in Indiana were doing; in part because the source material has not been examined. Still another consideration is that Congregational churches in Indiana were so few in number. This paper is not a complete account of the growth of Congregationalism. It is a sketch, rather than a compendium, of this growth to the year 1858. Its aim is to suggest lines for further treatment, not exhaustively to deal with the subject.

The paucity of early Congregational churches in Indiana poses an interesting problem.² Speaking generally, Congregational churches were organized by emigrants from the New England states. Although New Englanders settled in Indiana, they were but few in number, as Lois Kimball Mathews has shown.³ Because that element formed a lower percentage of Indiana's population, there is less reason to look for Congregational churches in that state.⁴

¹ The writer is preparing a doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago on the subject, *The Operations of the American Home Missionary Society in the Old Northwest, 1826-1861*. The material here published is based on that research.

² The late Secretary of the Indiana Historical Society, Christopher B. Coleman, has stated that one must look to "the religious antecedents of the settlers rather than other considerations" for the weakness of this denomination. Coleman, "Some Religious Developments in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1905-), V (1909), 63; *Outline of Church History of Indiana, Bulletin No. 5 of the Indiana Historical Commission* [Indianapolis, Indiana, 1916], 5.

³ Lois K. Mathews, *The Expansion of New England* (Boston, 1909), 196-220.

⁴ According to the 1850 census the population of Indiana was 988,416. Yet in comparison with the population which was native to Indiana (541,079), New Englanders numbered only 10,646, or two per cent. Again, in comparison with the number of Indiana settlers who had been born outside of the state but within the United States (390,313), the New England element in Indiana amounted to only 2.7 per cent. In contrast to the situation obtaining in 1850 in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin where New Englanders were exceedingly numerous, this element hardly exceeded one per cent of the total

Aside from the rather general fact that New Englanders were scarce in Indiana, there were no important Congregational colonies in the state; nor had extensive sales of public lands been made to such companies as were purchasing them for New Englanders settling in Michigan and Illinois, thus brightening the prospects of Congregationalism there. Nor, as far as is known, were any Congregational churches constituted at the East for emigration to a preselected site in Indiana. Moreover, it frequently happened that the New Englanders who settled in Indiana were of the Baptist faith, as the settlement of the northern tier of counties illustrates.⁵

Why did New Englanders not come in larger numbers to Indiana? First, the early settlement of the state had proceeded from the South.⁶ Emigrants continued to flow from this section to Indiana long after 1825.⁷ Prior to that date, New Englanders usually reached this part of the West by crossing Ohio or by descending the Ohio River.⁸ Although Indiana was "free" under the Ordinance of 1787, the threat of slavery was not dealt a death blow in the state until 1823. Emigrants from New England probably did not desire to mingle their strong antislavery prejudices with Southerners. The same argument would apply to Illinois, although some New Englanders took up military lands in that state. It may also be observed that the main current of emigration

population of the state of Indiana. Indiana's foreign-born population (54,426) amounted to more than five times the number of New England emigrants. If, for the purpose of calculation, one adds all who had settled in Indiana by 1850 from the state of New York (24,310), on the theory that a large percentage of these emigrants had originally been New Englanders or were descendants of New Englanders (which is not highly improbable), only 3.5 per cent of the population would have given Indiana a Yankee flavoring. *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Statistics*, xxxvi, 756, 780-781. Since the figures on page 780 vary slightly from those on page xxxvi, those on the latter page were used. The 1860 census showed 12,307 New Englanders in Indiana, or only nine-tenths of one per cent of the total population (1,350,428). *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Statistics of Population*, I, iv, 130.

⁵ Mathews, *The Expansion of New England*, 196-220; *History of Steuben County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1885), 455-456.

⁶ Frederick J. Turner, *Rise of the New West (American Nation Series, 28 vols., New York, 1904-1925, edited by Albert B. Hart)*, XIV (1906), 75-78.

⁷ John D. Barnhart, "Sources of Southern Migration into the Old Northwest," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1914-), XXII (1935), 49-62.

⁸ Frederic L. Paxson, "The Gateways of the Old Northwest," *Historical Collections . . . Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society* (Lansing, Michigan, 1877-1929), XXXVIII (1912), 139-148.

from New England to the region west of Ohio did not set in until after 1830.⁹ Second, while the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 augured well for the settlement of northern Indiana, the results were disappointingly small. Despite the use of the old Detroit-Chicago Trail and the portage of the St. Joseph River at South Bend, it was more difficult to reach Indiana than the Territory of Michigan. Milwaukee and Chicago were more accessible than was the northern tier of Indiana. While southern and eastern Michigan filled rapidly owing to the facility of passage through the Erie Canal, northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin did not share extensively in the migrations from New England until the Winnebago and Black Hawk Indian uprisings had been put down. Even in the 1840's northern Indiana was relatively isolated. As late as 1846 Indiana-bound shipping was considered a bad risk due to storms on Lake Michigan. Damage was repeatedly inflicted by wind and waves on the Michigan City harbor, a harbor whose improvement Congress entirely neglected while the war with Mexico was being prosecuted.¹⁰ Third, it has been demonstrated that the "wet lands" of the Hoosier state greatly retarded the settlement of its northern and north-central sections.¹¹ Speculation in the public lands of Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, added to the relative ease with which these regions could be reached by hundreds of thousands of colonists, accounted for a more rapid settlement around and beyond Indiana. Previous to the Panic of 1837, emigrants from the New England states, by-passing Indiana, were pouring into these other states and territories. After 1843 a measure of economic improvement was noticeable and colonists swarmed into them in even greater numbers.¹²

⁹ Arthur C. Boggess, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830*, in Chicago Historical Society, *Collections*, V (Chicago, 1908), 146, 180, 185. The defeat of the proslavery forces in Indiana influenced the vote in Illinois in 1824 when the proposal to hold a state convention was decisively beaten.

¹⁰ The letters of Erastus Colton, pastor of the Congregational church of Michigan City, Indiana, describe this situation in the later 1840's. Erastus Colton, Michigan City, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, December 9, 1847 and April 1, 1848, in the American Home Missionary Society Papers, Hammond Library, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois.

¹¹ Richard L. Power, "Wet Lands and the Hoosier Stereotype," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXII, 33-48.

¹² Mathews, *The Expansion of New England*, 196-249. See also James Thomson, Wabash, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, July 1, 1845, who says: "I have been disappointed thus far in the aid that I

There is a more cogent reason why the forces of Congregationalism in Indiana were impoverished in the early period. This is to be found in the record of the agencies which planted the numerous mission churches, namely, the Presbyterian General Assembly's Board of Missions, the Missionary Society of Connecticut and the United Domestic Missionary Society. In Indiana the appointees of all these agencies organized only Presbyterian churches. Despite the fact that a large percentage of the ministers employed by the two last-named societies were Congregationalists, no Congregational churches were formed in Indiana.¹³ When the American Home Missionary Society entered the Indiana field in 1826, its appointees followed the precedent of founding Presbyterian churches.¹⁴

As far as is known, there was not a Congregational church in Indiana until 1833 when one was formed at Bath, in Franklin County, only a few miles across the state line from Oxford, Ohio, where Robert Hamilton Bishop and his followers in Miami University strengthened the Presbyterian cause. The origin of this church is traceable to a dispute occurring in the Presbyterian church of Bath. The Congregationalists, who partly composed it, revolted against the high-handed measures of Archibald Craig, a former appointee of the American Home Missionary Society, who became the pastor in 1833. Founded in 1822, the Presbyterian church in Bath had recently enjoyed the pastoral labors of one Peter Crocker, a Congregationalist from Falmouth, Massachusetts, who had come West for his health, bought a farm in this vicinity and preached by leave of the Oxford Presbytery. Craig, an Old School Presbyterian, did not take kindly to these arrangements. Permitting jealousy to run away with his reason, he literally bolted the church doors against the Congregationalists after he had agitated in the church session

hoped we who are toiling here to lay the foundations would receive by immigration after our Canal was opened. Thus far I have not had one good helper in all that have come in these three years past. Almost all the help of that kind as yet pass us by and go on to Wisconsin or Michigan." This letter is in the American Home Missionary Society Papers.

¹³ John M. Dickey, *A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Indiana* (Madison, Indiana, 1828), 16-18; Hanford A. Edson, *Contributions to the Early History of the Presbyterian Church in Indiana*, . . . (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1898), 255-258.

¹⁴ Nathaniel A. Hyde, *Congregationalism in Indiana* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1895), 15, 19.

the troublesome question of excommunicating them. Failing to dampen the ardor of his rivals, Craig had to content himself with preaching to the small Presbyterian remnant while Crocker continued as the pastor over the Congregationalists, who organized their own church and erected a house of worship 30 x 50 feet in size. When Moses H. Wilder became the pastor in 1836, the Bath Congregational church was strong and healthy. It aided in organizing the First Congregational Association of Indiana in 1837.¹⁵

Wilder soon found himself laden with responsibilities, not only as the Association scribe, but as the pastor of two other small Congregational churches in the region. One of these was at Fairfield, the other was on Sand Creek in Decatur County. Another Congregational church was organized in Decatur County out of "the better half" of the Presbyterian church organized earlier by Samuel G. Lowry, who had recently been transferred to Crawfordsville as the home missionary agent for northern Indiana. Here Presbyterianism of the Old School struggled to maintain itself against the Congregationalism of a few New Englanders who were dissatisfied with the party strife in the General Assembly. Although it was shortlived, the Indiana Association was a direct challenge to Presbyterianism. As Wilder said,

The association met [and] appointed a standing committee of missions who through their scribe shall be a medium [of] correspondence with the Am. Home Miss. Society respecting applications for aid from the churches within our bounds [in order] that we may make our applica-

¹⁵ August J. Reifel, *History of Franklin County, Indiana* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1915), 447-448; *Atlas of Franklin Co., Indiana*, . . . (Chicago, 1882), 41, 101; *Atlas of Union County, Indiana*, . . . (Chicago, 1884), 15, 40, 59; James H. Rodabaugh, *Robert Hamilton Bishop* in *Ohio Historical Collections*, IV (Columbus, Ohio, 1935), 97-115; Moses H. Wilder, Bath, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, November 21, 1836; application of the church committee to the American Home Missionary Society secretaries, Bath, Indiana, September 29, 1836; Moses H. Wilder, Bath, Indiana, to Absalom Peters, New York, February 8, May 2, July 31, and October 30, 1837. Hyde mentions the organization of the First Congregational Association of Indiana in *Congregationalism in Indiana*, 37-38, and quotes from an old issue of the *Terre Haute, Indiana, Wabash Courier* relative to its formation, but he fails to give the date of issue. An earlier version of the Hyde treatise was published in the *Minutes of the . . . Congregational Churches and Ministers of Indiana* . . . (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1883), 27-42, without reference to the First Congregational Association. See also Matthew Spinka (ed.), *A History of Illinois Congregational and Christian Churches* (Chicago, 1944), 61-63 for a brief statement of the significance of the revolt against the Plan of Union being participated in by Congregationalists in Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois.

tions direct to your committee instead of going through a Presbyterian channel when there is sometimes a strong feeling against the *name* we bear.¹⁶

The fortunes of Congregationalism were dealt a heavy blow when Wilder left his field for Ohio in 1839.¹⁷

CONGREGATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN INDIANA, 1837-1858

Year formed	Name
1837	First Congregational Association of Indiana
1844	Evangelical Association of the Wabash Valley (Terre Haute Association)
1855	Evangelical Association of Southern Indiana and Illinois
1855	Association of Eastern Indiana
1858	Upper Wabash Valley Association
1858	INDIANA CONFERENCE OF CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES

The Terre Haute Church, founded December 30, 1834,¹⁸ did not immediately regard itself as a Congregational church, since all seventeen of its charter members were Presbyterians. The pastor, Mark A. Jewett, was a Methodist who hailed from

¹⁶ Moses H. Wilder, Bath, Indiana, to Absalom Peters, New York, July 31, 1837, in American Home Missionary Society Papers.

¹⁷ Moses H. Wilder, Fairfield, Indiana, to Milton Badger and American Home Missionary Society secretaries, New York, January 24, April 3, May 28, August 1, and December 10, 1838; Moses H. Wilder, Batavia, Clermont County, Ohio, to Milton Badger, New York, April 7, 1839; Samuel G. Lowry, Crawfordsville, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, August 8 and August 24, 1838; Ransom Hawley, Bloomington, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, August 20, 1838. All these letters deal with the fortunes of the infant Congregational churches and the First Congregational Association of Indiana.

¹⁸ There was Presbyterian preaching in Terre Haute before the organization of this independent church. J. R. Wheelock, grandson of Professor Eleazer Wheelock of Dartmouth College fame, had removed there from Decatur County in 1833 after experiencing "a spirit of persecution [*sic*] from Old School Presbyterians." "I was arraigned before the Presbytery there," he said, "condemned for preaching New England divinity—but the Synod reversed the sentence last Oct. While under this cloud I removed to this place, & sustained myself & family by teaching a Seminary here & what little I could get for preaching. Last April I gave up the Seminary & now devote myself exclusively to my appropriate work as a minister. My trial has produced a good effect on the cause of Truth in the State & I hope has in some measure been sanctified to myself. This is an interesting place, large & growing delightfully situated on the Wabash where the Cumberland or National Road crosses—with a beautiful prairie around it—but in a moral point of view every thing is the reverse. A little feeble church & they divided, & without much moral courage—the people generally enterprising, intelligent & bent on pleasure & money making—disposed to do but little for the support of the Gospel." J. R. Wheelock, Terre Haute, Indiana, to his cousins, the Misses Sarah, Ruth or Mary Patten Old Court House Street, Hartford, Conn., June 20, 1834. This letter is

Massachusetts.¹⁹ Yet all favored Congregationalism²⁰ and supported the nearby undertakings of the American Home Missionary Society.²¹

The church at Michigan City in its beginnings was a Plan-of-Union church, consisting of nine members. It was formed in May, 1835,²² by John Morrill, a Presbyterian minister who had previously served under the American Home Missionary Society in southeastern Indiana, who later formed the First Congregational Church of Rockford, Illinois (1837), and still later organized other Congregational churches in the northern section of that state. By 1841 internal dissensions between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists had virtually wrecked the church at "the City," but out of this struggle came a new organization which gave the Congregationalists the autonomy they were seeking. By the end of the 1840's this was a strong church.²³ The Western Congregational Convention was held in its rooms in 1846.²⁴

Another Congregational church was organized by a band of New Englanders in Richmond, early in 1835.²⁵ So desperate was the struggle for survival, however, that by 1839 the resources of the church were entirely exhausted and the few remaining members joined the New School Presbyterian church formed meanwhile as the result of the schism in the

in the William Henry Smith Memorial Library of the Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Following the excision of the four synods by the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1837, Wheelock wrote of his feeling "a strong reaction in this section . . . Scarcely a member of this Presby. (Crawfordsville) can be found to advocate those unprecedented proceedings. Many who were on the fence will henceforth be decided against the measures of that immortal Assembly." J. R. Wheelock, Greencastle, Indiana, to Absalom Peters, New York, August 8, 1837.

¹⁹ Data supplied by Albert A. Faurot, Church Clerk. The letter is filed in the Hammond Library, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois.

²⁰ Hyde, *Congregationalism in Indiana*, 27-29.

²¹ Especially encouraged by the Terre Haute people was the work of Dean Andrews, pastor of the Congregational church in Marshall, Illinois, a few miles distant.

²² John Morrill, Michigan City, Indiana, to Absalom Peters, New York, February 10, 1836, in the American Home Missionary Society Papers.

²³ The letters of Erastus Colton cited previously.

²⁴ *Minutes of the Western Congregational Convention, held at Michigan City, Indiana, July 30—August 2, 1846* (New York, 1878).

²⁵ Application of the church to the American Home Missionary Society Executive Committee, June 3, 1836; Peter Crocker, Richmond, Indiana, to Absalom Peters, New York, October 12, 1836.

General Assembly. It was reliably reported that illness and removals, the influence of the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Episcopalians (to say nothing of the "godless remainder of the two thousand inhabitants" of Richmond) combined with the after-effects of the Panic of 1837 to snuff out the existence of this promising Congregational organization.²⁶

Two churches were organized on the Plan of Union (Orland and Ontario, both being affiliated with the Presbytery of St. Joseph), in 1836 and 1840, respectively. The Ontario church had become Congregational in 1843,²⁷ and the Orland church changed to the Congregational polity in 1848.²⁸

Four or five small Congregational churches flourished in the mid-1840's in the region about Terre Haute and were under the pastoral care of Welton M. Modesitt. Among these were the churches of Otter Creek with eighteen members and Lost Creek with thirteen members. There were preaching stations at Numa, Cloverland, and other points where the average attendance was about fifty on the Sabbath.²⁹ These smaller churches were associated with the larger church of Marshall, Illinois, and the prosperous Terre Haute congregation in a body known as the Evangelical Congregational Association of the Wabash Valley, organized in 1844.³⁰

Two churches fully embracing the Congregational polity were organized in 1839, one in the town of Boonville and the

²⁶ Peter Crocker, Richmond, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, April 13, 1839; Andrew W. Young, *History of Wayne County, Indiana* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1872), 407.

²⁷ MS Minutes, Presbytery of St. Joseph, 158. (Courtesy of the Stated Clerk of the Synod of Michigan, John Comin, Rackham Building, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.)

²⁸ Jacob Patch, Orland, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, February 28, 1848.

²⁹ Welton M. Modesitt, Terre Haute, Indiana, to Charles Hall, New York, March 9, 1847.

³⁰ William W. Sweet, *The Congregationalists* (vol. III of *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1850*, Chicago, 1939), 22; George Punchard, *Congregationalism in America* (5 vols., Boston, 1881), II, 274, mentions M. A. Jewett and Dean Andrews as prime movers in this "useful and efficient organization," but gives no reference to documents relating to the history of this body. The Congregational church of Marshall, Illinois, adhered to this body in 1844. A. V. Gilbert, *The First Congregational Church of Marshall, Illinois*, a typewritten page filed in the Hammond Library, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois; see also the application of the German Congregational Church of Indianapolis in behalf of the pastor, Charles Riehle, a member of this body, to the American Home Missionary Society Executive Committee, December 10, 1852.

other in Ohio Township in Warrick County.³¹ As late as 1844, it was reported that New Englanders were still hesitant about entering southwestern Indiana. They were inclined to look down on the inhabitants of that region as emigrants from the South and feared complications over contradictory attitudes toward the slavery question. Calvin Butler, the missionary, stated that he could stand in Warrick County and look across seven contiguous counties in none of which had the American Home Missionary Society stationed its appointees, except the county where he had been laboring seventeen years. During his long stay in Boonville, Butler noted great improvement in the cultural life of the people. Yet he imagined how a pastor in his native Connecticut might feel were he to cast his eyes over its lovely hills and valleys and realize that he was alone in the service of Christ!³² A veteran Presbyterian minister, one of the generation of the pioneers who had been present for the constitution of the Synod of Indiana in 1826, John McElroy Dickey, also toured southern Indiana in 1843 in the interest of the American Home Missionary Society. He reported in great detail on the conditions, religious and otherwise, and his findings support Butler's.³³

After 1833, the belated growth of Congregationalism in Indiana was promoted alike by the laymen and the ministers. With the exception of the churches in Warrick County (which were always in a desperate economic condition), all the Indiana Congregational churches organized previous to 1850 were organized by a few New England families. The majority of the pastors of these churches had also been Congregationalists in New England. Whether they were Presbyterians or Congregationalists, however, all these pastors but one (Jewett in Terre Haute) were sustained in the field by the American Home Missionary Society. This fact in itself is proof that the Society was endeavoring to act impartially between these

³¹ Calvin Butler, Boonville, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, July 15, 1841. The total membership in both churches was only fifty.

³² Calvin Butler, Boonville, Indiana, to Milton Badger, New York, September 8, 1841, April 1, July 8, October 18, 1842, October 7, 1844, September 15, 1846, and May 24, 1847. Fear of the Catholics marks the last-noted letter.

³³ John M. Dickey, New Washington, Clark County, Indiana, to Milton Badger and Charles Hall, New York, August 9, 1843: "I have thought for some time of continuing the history of the churches in this state, but have been prevented for want of time. I think I shall commence the work. I can write the history of each church I visit whilst I am in its bounds." Dickey's two-volume unfinished manuscript, *History of Presbyterianism in Indiana*, carrying the story down to 1847, may be seen at the Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.

two denominations. Yet it is also a fact that the organization of all these churches was due to the progress of the revolt against the Plan of Union with the Presbyterians, although here the revolt was less violent than it was in Michigan and Illinois. With the organization of the earliest Indiana Congregational churches the slavery question had little to do, but following the organization of the Free Synod of Cincinnati in 1847 some Presbyterian churches in the eastern and northern counties of the state united with that body or swung over to Congregationalism.³⁴ Later, some Indiana churches derived partial support for their ministers from the American Missionary Association. Several of these men in July, 1855, organized a Congregational association in Jay and Adams counties. There were seven places in this region where preaching was held regularly every two weeks.³⁵ This abolitionist association was given the support of the two small Congregational churches of Buena Vista (Randolph County) and Monroe Township (Adams County), in 1857.³⁶

The Plymouth Congregational Church of Indianapolis was organized in 1857. The first pastor of this thriving church was Nathaniel A. Hyde.³⁷ Soon there was a movement to set up a state-wide fellowship of the Congregational ministers and churches, and this organization was consummated in 1858.³⁸ It was not long until its life was dominated by clear-visioned, vigorous ministers, Lyman Abbott among them. Although Indiana Congregationalism lacked both numbers and prospects,³⁹ it did not fall behind other Western states either in the character of its ministry or in the loyalty of its church members who, however, numbered less than a thousand in 1858.

³⁴ James Boggs to David B. Coe, New Corydon, Indiana, August 5, 1852; James Boggs to David B. Coe, LaPorte, Indiana, October 11, 1852. Boggs states that "most antislavery members [of the churches and the presbyteries with which he was acquainted] prefer Congregationalism to the Free Presbyterian Synod." He noted, however, that some of the strongest Presbyterian groups were made up of Colonizationists even at this late date. In the vicinity of New Corydon, Boggs found an ultra antislavery spirit, but at LaPorte he found some Congregationalists among whom there was no ultra antislavery feeling.

³⁵ *American Missionary* (10 vols., New York, 1846-1856), IX (September, 1855), 86.

³⁶ *American Missionary*, second series (20 vols., New York, 1857-1876), I (July, 1857), 159.

³⁷ Hyde, *Congregationalism in Indiana*, 35-38.

³⁸ *Minutes of the General Association of Congregational Churches and Ministers of Indiana, at its meeting in Indianapolis, May 12, 1859, with an appendix* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1859), 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

